
A Closer Look at Radical Islam: Interview with Joseph A. Butta, Jr.

Interviewed by John Whisenhunt, Editor

Editorial Abstract: *In a follow up to his 2004 visit, Mr. Butta spoke at length with JIOC analysts about contemporary trends in radical Islamic thought and actions. He describes the challenges involved in engaging Muslim societies, and presents a methodology for identifying more moderate Islamic elements.*

IO Sphere: During your prior visit, you outlined the historical and cultural basis of the current conflict between radical Islam and the West. As the Global War on Terrorism heads into a fifth year, what changes have you seen since we last spoke with you?

Mr. Butta: Militarily our presence in Afghanistan frustrates the Taliban, in Iraq it frustrates a radical Arab insurgency, and our presence in proximity to Iran frustrates the pan-Islamic goals and ambitions of this Khomeini influenced State. Obviously we can expect resistance in these areas until or unless these adversaries are either defeated, or pick a path of peaceful coexistence. Events closer to home are more troubling, including; the Quran row that allegedly occurred at Guantanamo (US Naval Station, Cuba), the European “Prophet Cartoon Caper,” the murder of a Dutch film maker, the London human bomb attacks, the French riots, and the plot to destroy Canadian land marks and decapitate the Canadian Prime Minister. There have been assaults, threats and law suits filed against authors Ibn Warraq, Bat Ye’or, Robert Spencer, Mark Gabriel, Oriana Fallaci, and others including Muslim apostates. This has forced some of them to change their true names and live in undisclosed locations here in the West, including the United States. The crux of this problem can be traced to our respective education systems. Westerners are generally taught to think critically; one gathers information from various sources then makes up one’s own mind. These choices include politics and religion. Muslims are not taught to think critically concerning Muhammad’s life, words, actions or religion — which includes his politics. For them, the gates of Itchtehad have long been closed. Our adversary, Radical Islam, is both religious and political — we can only truly understand it within this context. Since this adversary justifies its actions through the words of the Quran, the Hadith, the Sira, and the History of Al-Tabari, it becomes natural for Westerners to examine these sources to discover the source of our adversaries’ religious and political motives for acts like declaring Jihad, becoming a human bomb, etc.

What the authors above, and others, discovered was a Polemic against Jews, Christians, all non-Muslims, Muslim hypocrites, renegades and Apostates. Polemic is not unique to Islam: it can be found in the Old Testament regarding Jebusites, Ammonites, Amorites, Amalakites, Philistines and others. The New Testament includes polemic regarding Scribes, Pharisees,

and Sadducees. The Jewish Talmud includes polemic regarding Jesus and Christians. A *truly* moderate Muslim will conclude that the Polemic contained within Islam’s sacred texts only applied to a time in the past—it does not apply today. A Muslim who makes this decision will develop friendships outside of his group, including Jews and Christians. Muslim radicals have concluded the Islamic polemic applies to Jews, Christians, all-non Muslims, Muslim hypocrites, renegades and apostates for ALL time. They point to the Islamic past as justification for what occurs in the present. Their actions and attitudes towards non-Muslims and Muslims with whom they disagree are confirmed for them through many examples: the extermination, expulsion, and enslavement of the Jews from Medina, Khaybar and Fadak; the expulsion of Arabian Christians, Muslim invasions of Byzantine and Persian territory; the invasion of Spain, Portugal, France, Sicily, Italy and India; the Defeat of the Crusader Kingdom in 1291, the Ottoman Turkish invasion of the Balkans; and the fall and de-Christianization of Constantinople.

When some Westerners embark on a critical analysis of these texts and Islamic history, Muslim reaction is often outright indignation. For Muslims, the issue was decided long ago. Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah, and the Quran is the word of Allah. What advances Islam is good; what hinders Islam is bad. From this point of view, any Western attempt to scrutinize or criticize Islam or it’s Prophet is often met with



*Demonstrations send many messages.
(Defense Link)*

threats, character assassination or violence. For us, careful examination of the Islam Polemic leads to an understanding of Radical Muslim behavior, and insight into why Muhammad is excluded from Jewish and Christian tradition.

IO Sphere: *The West is starting to focus more on development and synchronization of unified messages to counter the ideals of Islamic extremism. Those extremists seem to be doing a good job. Do you think we're making any progress in this area? Do you see any group or government who provides a good model for doing this?*

Mr. Butta: The key to what you ask is what the West must do. We must stay engaged, because practice and observance of Islam's ritual's alone does not moderate radical behavior. Radicals practice these rituals, and fundamentally believe the same as secular and traditional Muslims. Politically, Islam focuses on the Medinan Sura's of the Quran, which deal with political expansion. Radicals argue that the earlier or Meccan Quranic Sura's have been abrogated. Reliance on these later passages justified earlier Jihad which: expelled Jews and Christians from Arabia; led to the invasion of the Middle East and North Africa; subjugated the Jewish and Christian populations under the provisions of Dhimmitude; nearly eliminated Zoroastrianism from Persia; eliminated the Buddhist's from India and Afghanistan; and imposed slaughter among the Hindus of India. Within 100 years of Muhammad's death, this empire reigned from southwestern France to western China. History shows us that political Islam by nature wants to expand. It is this Islam, infused with radical zeal, that we in the West must confront. Governments and their citizens must recognize all of this before we can undertake a concerted and concentrated effort. In my estimation there is still much to do.

IO Sphere: *Analysts describe radical Islam as being in a period of transition. Is the U.S. in a position to take advantage of this by exploiting or influencing our adversaries, in ways other than military action?*

Mr. Butta: Our experiences with Guantanamo detainees show those who are the most ideologically committed to the Jihad will not be swayed by acts of kindness, or any re-education program. The military must address those who are ideologically hardened. This war is fought in the media, in the political arena, and in the realm of religious ideals — defining right behavior from wrong behavior. These are all subsets of an education offensive that we must launch. The goal is to influence those on the fringes, and Muslim youth, and convince them co-existence with non-Muslims is a good thing. I'll address media and religious components later. We must champion the political component, and the virtues of a Western-based democracy. This can be accomplished by pointing to our own history. Compare and contrast Pre-WWII Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan with the Germany and Japan of the 21st Century. We should illustrate how working with the United



*Visions of greater Islamic influence.
(Islamic Society of Britain)*

States will benefit nations like Afghanistan and Iraq, which were in conflict with the United States. Germany and Japan became success stories, so why not Afghanistan and Iraq? We must also be aggressive towards the existence of Madrassas; those traditional schools that are teaching a new generation of Muslim youth to despise non-Muslims. If Muslim youth are ideologically disarmed, we'll see less need to employ a military remedy against future Islamic radicalism.

IO Sphere: *Some scholars suggest we're missing out on opportunities to engage moderate Islamic groups and clerics. Where would you say we need to focus that effort?*

Mr. Butta: There are some points we must clarify when addressing this question. Scholars may define the word "moderate" differently depending upon which tradition they represent. Let me introduce a set of criteria for determining if a group, cleric or individual are truly moderate:

1. a) Do you consider yourself a Wahhabi?
b) Do you consider yourself a pro-Khomeini Shiite or adhere to the policies of Ali Khamanei or Mahmoud Ahmadinejad?
2. a) Do you belong to any organization or religious group that is funded by Wahhabi's or teaches its precepts?
b) Do you belong to any organization or religious group that is funded by the government of Iran or its proxy Hizballah?
3. a) What are your opinions of the teachings and actions of Ibn Wahhab in dealing with non-Muslims, and Muslims with whom he disagreed?
b) What are your opinions of the teachings and actions of Ayatollah Khomeini, Ali Khamanei, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in dealing with Non-Muslims and Muslims with whom they disagree?

4. Where Muslims are the minority, should they pledge allegiance to that government?

If the group, cleric, or person are considered Wahhabi based or Pro-Khomeini Shi'a and don't believe that Muslim minorities in the United States should pledge allegiance to our government, they should NEVER be considered moderate.

5. Should Jihad, "Holy War against the Infidel" be acceptable in today's world?

6. Who was responsible for the events Of 9/11?

7. Do some Muslims commit terrorist acts?

8. What is your opinion of individuals who use themselves as human bombs to kill innocent civilians? Jews? Christians? Non-believers? Israelis? Americans? Westerners? Other Muslims with whom they disagree?

9. Do any Muslims groups or clerics promote terrorism?

10. Do you believe that some Muslims plan, support and perpetrate acts of terror against non-Muslims and against Muslims with whom they disagree?

If the group, cleric, or person believe Jihad against Infidels is acceptable, deny Muslim radicals were responsible for the events of 9/11, deny that some Muslims commit acts of terror, believe it is acceptable for Muslim human bombs to kill Jews, Christians, other non-Muslims/Muslims with whom they disagree, and don't believe any Muslim groups or clerics promote terrorism, then the weight of these responses should indicate that the group, cleric or person is NOT moderate. Continuing along these lines:

11. Should Sharia, Islamic Law or Islamic customs, supersede secular law?

12. Should Non-Muslims enjoy equality with Muslims?

13. Should women enjoy equality with men?

14. Do you consider any religion other than Islam as legitimate/valid?

15. Do Muslims have the right to convert to another religion?

16. If a Muslim converts to Judaism or Christianity, do you consider that person an apostate?

17. Are Sufi's and Shiites to be considered Muslims?

18. What is your opinion of Muslims who disagree with you?

19. Can Islam learn anything from Western civilization?

20. Can you accept, in today's society, that you may be exposed to extra scrutiny in regard to security measures?

If the group, cleric, or person believes: that Islamic law or customs should supersede secular law in the United States; non-Muslims are not equal to Muslims; women should not enjoy equality with men; don't believe that any religion except Islam is valid; don't believe Muslims have a right to choose another religion; believe apostate Muslims should be killed; don't consider Shi'a or Sufi's Muslims; don't believe Islam can learn from Western civilization; and can't accept that

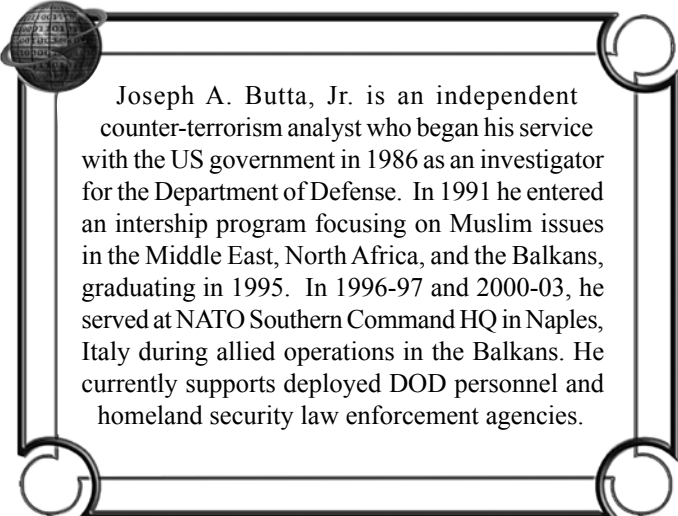
Muslims in the US may have to endure some scrutiny, these respondents may well be considered moderate by the Muslim community. But, note these responses run counter to the US Declaration of Independence, the US Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Therefore we may not consider some of these respondents moderate. I believe we should focus on who is moderate — vice radical — who is trustworthy, and who are friends vice adversaries.

IO Sphere: *We see a lot of discussion about the media front in this conflict, and how the radical Arab/Islamic outlets successfully dominate the "Arab Street." How do we provide a counter-message? Should we try and degrade existing channels, or do we need a Western-run Al Jazeera equivalent?*

Mr. Butta: We should not only establish our own network in the Middle East—which I believe we are doing—that represents Western thought and point of view. But we should also provide representatives who are politically savvy to al Arabiya and al Jazeera, who can provide that point of view on Arab television. In addition, we should send or encourage representatives of Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish denominations to speak on Arab television. They would not only provide their points of view, but also humanize themselves to the Arab street, and stress we are all God's children: all worthy of love, respect and equality. Basically we should give the Arab street another point of view, and something else to think about, such as peaceful alternatives. These together would help educate and also intellectually defend our institutions.

IO Sphere: *Thank you again for visiting.*

Mr. Butta: You're welcome. Thanks for the invitation.



Joseph A. Butta, Jr. is an independent counter-terrorism analyst who began his service with the US government in 1986 as an investigator for the Department of Defense. In 1991 he entered an internship program focusing on Muslim issues in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Balkans, graduating in 1995. In 1996-97 and 2000-03, he served at NATO Southern Command HQ in Naples, Italy during allied operations in the Balkans. He currently supports deployed DOD personnel and homeland security law enforcement agencies.